



Welcome Subscriber 75667 ([Logout](#) or [View Account](#))

July 30th, 2013

Ira Hudson Decoys Lead Sporting Art Sale

by Jeanne Schinto



Copley Fine Art Auctions, Plymouth, Massachusetts

Photos courtesy Copley

"This auction was all about Ira Hudson," said Stephen B. O'Brien Jr., president of Copley Fine Art Auctions, whose annual summer sale took place on July 30 and 31 at its usual venue, the Radisson Hotel in Plymouth, Massachusetts. "That was the biggest block of [major] carvings by a single maker that we had, and we were thrilled with the results."

Ira D. Hudson (1873-1949), who lived and worked on Chincoteague Island, Virginia, is considered to be one of America's great folk artists by the decoy-collecting community and beyond. In the Copley catalog a circa 1930 photograph shows him in overalls in the doorway of his rustic workshop where, his family's Web site says, he sold his decoys for \$4 per dozen "including weights." Over the decades since his death, the rising tide of the decoy market has made that pricing system seem more than quaint. In 2007, O'Brien sold a pair of hooded mergansers by Hudson as part of a \$7.5 million private sale. At this auction, a comparable circa 1930 pair of red-breasted mergansers by Hudson was the top lot, going on the phone at \$207,000 (including buyer's premium).

"These are iconic birds," said O'Brien, noting that pioneer collector William J. Mackey Jr. pictured them in his 1965 book *American Bird Decoys*. They then passed through the hands of two other collectors, George W. Thompson of Cazenovia, New York, and William H. Purnell Jr., who branded them with his initials. Finally, they went to another unnamed private collector, who consigned them to this sale along with the other major Hudson lots.

The drake was in "terrific" condition, said O'Brien. The hen's bill was repaired. Otherwise, he felt they might have gone for \$300,000/400,000. (The estimate was \$175,000/225,000.) That said, O'Brien observed, "If you always look for perfection in early antique gunning decoys, you will miss out on a lot of opportunities to put birds on your shelves."

Hudson's circa 1940 pintail pair was another winner, selling in the room at just above the high estimate for \$80,500. That twosome is illustrated in Henry A. Fleckenstein's 1983 *Southern Decoys of Virginia and the Carolinas*. It is also included in Henry H. Stansbury's 2002 book *Ira D. Hudson and Family, Chincoteague Carvers*, a comprehensive look at the multigenerational Hudson family of boatbuilders, decoy makers, and decorative carvers. Stansbury was in the audience for the sale.

Hudson's circa 1930 brant, similar to one illustrated in the Stansbury book, sold for \$20,700 (est. \$15,000/20,000). It had previously brought \$12,650 as part of the collection of Dr. James M. McCleery in a landmark sale held in New York City at Sotheby's in association with Guyette & Schmidt on January 22 and 23, 2000.

Two bidders got good deals on their Hudsons. One bidder, whom we are allowed to describe only as "a gentleman hunter," paid an underestimate \$42,250 for a circa 1930 bufflehead pair. Each bird's underside bore an ink stamp denoting the pair's first owner, carver and early collector Davison Hawthorne of Maryland's Eastern Shore. From there the birds went to another collector, Robert Gresham, and then to the consignors.

The other bidder who paid under the estimate for a Hudson took a matched pair of circa 1930 broadbills for \$13,800. Each duck was branded "P" for Purnell.

The one major Hudson lot that did not sell was a Canada goose pair that had been, like the broadbills, in the Purnell collection. Estimated at \$35,000/45,000, the geese were bought in at \$18,000. Fairly weathered, with some restoration to their necks, they were scheduled to be posted for sale on the Copley Web site, along with some other unsold lots.

The same gentleman hunter who bought the Hudson bufflehead pair took a circa 1890 brant by another maker featured in this sale, Harry V. Shourds (1861-1920) of Tuckerton, New Jersey. The state's most famous decoy maker, Shourds was known to have been a strong influence on Hudson. O'Brien said of the brant, "It was the single best Shourds brant I've ever seen." The gentleman hunter won it for \$57,500 (est. \$25,000/35,000).

A circa 1890 swimming black duck by Shourds went back to the state where it was made. It sold for \$71,875 (est. \$60,000/90,000) to a New Jersey-based collector. O'Brien said there are extant at most only two other examples in original paint. The best-known example is illustrated in James R. Doherty's 2011 *Classic New Jersey Decoys* as part of the Doherty collection.

Measuring only 7½" in length, a small sandpiper by Shourds sold for \$23,000 (est. \$12,000/18,000). Similar to one featured on the dust jacket of the Doherty book, this bird once had been in the Joseph B. French collection, then went to the consignors. "Only a couple of these true sandpipers by Shourds have ever surfaced," O'Brien said. He noted that the yellowlegs has identical paint but a longer bill, and fakers who want to pass off a yellowlegs as a rarity will shorten a yellowlegs's bill.

A. Elmer Crowell is the decoy maker name that most generalists recognize. At this sale, only a rare and early (circa 1915) decorative tern by the Cape Codder was a top seller, going at \$14,375 (est. \$8000/12,000). As for Crowell's miniatures, only an extremely rare preening Canada goose had an exceptional result, selling for \$5642.50 (est. \$2000/4000). The rest were soft.

"So many [Crowell miniatures] have come on the market. The big strong prices that we were pulling a few years ago brought them out," O'Brien commented. "The whole miniature market has been finicky of late, with not much predictability." Of the top miniature carvers—A.J. King, Joe Lincoln, George Boyd, and Crowell—only King and Lincoln did well at this sale.

A miniature wild turkey family group by King (1878-1963) of North Scituate, Rhode Island, sold for an above-estimate \$6325. The circa 1940 tableau, just 5" tall, features a parental pair with five young poults. Another circa 1940 work by King—a diorama featuring a covey of six miniature bobwhite quail—made \$6037.50. The backdrop of the 9¼" tall case is a miniature landscape painting by the artist.

An unsigned pair of red-breasted mergansers was cataloged as circa 1900, a school of Stratford—Stratford, Connecticut, that is. They are a rarity, with only one other hen known and no drakes at all. The carving and decorations are highly unusual, if not unique. Both birds have extensive gouge-feather carving, with each treatment different for head, body, and wings. The gouge carving on the heads is unusual in itself for any decoy maker. "You almost never see that," said O'Brien. What is more, each bird has a different tail treatment, i.e., a scalloped-edge tail design on the drake and a paddle tail on the hen. Additionally, several construction features are virtuosic—i.e., the bottoms are hollowed "to perfection" (the catalog's phrase) in the Stratford bottom-board style. Estimated at \$45,000/55,000, the pair went for \$54,625, and O'Brien said the buyer was smart to get them at that price before more collectors start focusing on this regional category.

On the first day of the sale, when the decoys were offered, about 100 bidders filled the room. On the second day, when the sporting art went up, only about 20 seats were filled. These were active bidders, however, who were there to compete with the always formidable phones.

Phone bidder 742 was often a successful contender on major paintings. That number bought the top fine-art lot of the sale, a 1960 watercolor of a quail hunt by Ogden M. Pleissner (1905-1983). Commissioned by Clifford L. Fitzgerald Jr., a New York advertising executive, the painting depicts him hunting on his Florida plantation with a friend. The painting brought \$120,750 (est. \$40,000/60,000), and according to Copley's researcher, it's the new record for a Pleissner watercolor. Two more Pleissner watercolors of fishing scenes—*A Shot at the River Crossing* and *Angling for Salmon*—went to the same bidder for \$48,875 each.

A late addition to the sale—a watercolor and gouache by Arthur Burdett Frost—went to a phone for \$57,500 (est. \$25,000/35,000). Titled *I Missed Mine to the Left*, the bird hunting scene was inscribed "Pheasant and Quail at Robins Island," a reference to a 435-acre parcel of land between the north and south forks of Long Island. The island has been owned since 1993 by Wall Street financier Louis Moore Bacon, who has secured a conservation easement for it. What do you give a man listed by Forbes as "one of the richest people on the planet?" Maybe this.

Two other paintings that inspired very competitive bidding were outside the sporting-art realm. One was a beautifully painted late 19th-century California mountain landscape by William Keith (1838-1911). Inscribed "S.F. 78," i.e., San Francisco, 1878, it sold to a bidder in the room for \$60,375 (est. \$30,000/50,000). The other non-sporting artwork was a William Aiken Walker portrait of an African-American cotton dockworker in New Orleans during Reconstruction. The Charleston native's oil fetched the second-highest price of the second day, \$83,375 (est. \$30,000/50,000). It was also a new world record price for an Aiken portrait, O'Brien said.

The total for the approximately 650-lot sale was about \$2.25 million, said O'Brien. "And I'm exceedingly happy with the results. It wasn't our biggest auction in terms of dollar value or number of lots, but what we had performed remarkably well."

We asked O'Brien if his sales had caused any decoy collectors to cross over into paintings. He said, "Not really." Rather, it's gone the other way, with more than a few paintings people eventually coming around to the beauty of the birds. "The way we've got the catalog set up, it's hard to avoid one or the other," he said. The previews are the same way. "And eventually, some of the paintings people have come up to me and said, 'What's up with those ducks?'"

For more information, phone (617) 536-0030 or see the Web site (www.copleyart.com).

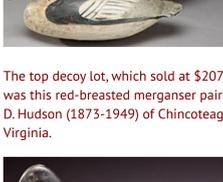
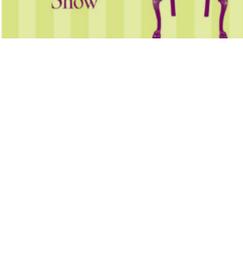
Originally published in the October 2013 issue of *Maine Antique Digest*.

© 2013 Maine Antique Digest

comments powered by Disqus

- No Cost until you Sell
- 9.9% Commission on Sales
- Easy Setup
- Most Trusted Marketplace

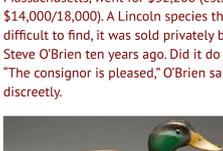
www.Rubylane.com



The top decoy lot, which sold at \$207,000, was this red-breasted merganser pair by Ira D. Hudson (1873-1949) of Chincoteague, Virginia.



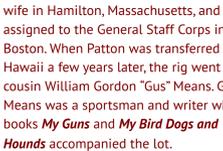
This brant by Harry V. Shourds (1861-1920) of Tuckerton, New Jersey, sold for \$57,500 (est. \$25,000/35,000).



This circa 1920 bluebill drake by Joseph W. Lincoln (1859-1938) of Accord, Massachusetts, went for \$32,200 (est. \$14,000/18,000). A Lincoln species that's difficult to find, it was sold privately by Steve O'Brien ten years ago. Did it do well? "The consignor is pleased," O'Brien said discreetly.



This 1936 mallard drake by the brothers Lemue T. Ward (1896-1984) and Stephen Ward (1895-1976) of Crisfield, Maryland, sold for \$18,400 (est. \$8000/12,000). The top consignment from the Mark R. Mahoney collection, it was made by the Wards for the White Mallard Outing Club of California. Mahoney bought it from California-based collector William Mori. For an interesting history of the duck-hunting club, see the Web site [King Quack Jr.](http://www.kingquackjr.com/whitemallard.html)



This turned-head goose with provenance that names General George S. Patton as its first owner sold for \$48,875 (est. \$10,000/15,000). It was made circa 1920 by George Boyd (1873-1941) of Seabrook, New Hampshire. Patton bought it from Boyd as part of a rig in 1923 while living with his wife in Hamilton, Massachusetts, and assigned to the General Staff Corps in Boston. When Patton was transferred to Hawaii a few years later, the rig went to his cousin William Gordon "Gus" Means. Gus Means was a sportsman and writer whose books *My Guns* and *My Bird Dogs and Hounds* accompanied the lot.



William Aiken Walker (1838-1921), *New Orleans Cotton Dock*, 23" x 13", oil on canvas, \$83,375 (est. \$30,000/50,000).



Phone bidder 742 paid \$120,750 (est. \$40,000/60,000) for *Quail Shooting* by Ogden M. Pleissner (1905-1983). The 1960 watercolor is 18" x 28".



The 18" x 30" oil on canvas *Family of Quail* by Gerard R. Hardenbergh sold for \$19,550 (est. \$5000/7000) to phone bidder 742.



The 30" x 44" oil on canvas *Bevy of Beauties* by Gerard R. Hardenbergh sold for \$43,125 (est. \$15,000/25,000) to phone bidder 742. The miniature quail diorama in front of the painting (also seen in the detail) was made circa 1940 by Allen J. King (1878-1963) of North Scituate, Rhode Island. It is 9¾" tall x 4" deep and sold for \$6037.50 (est. \$5000/8000). The life-size ruffed grouse is a circa 1970 carving by Mark Holland. It sold for \$1035 (est. \$1000/1500). Schinto photos.



Colin W. Burns (b. 1944), *Red Grouse, North Yorkshire Moors*, 28" x 36", oil on canvas, \$24,150 (est. \$4000/8000). Schinto photo.

This ad space now available. Call 1-877-237-6623 for details.

Advertising | Subscriptions | Billing | Editor

1 (800) 752-8521 • PO Box 1429

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. [Learn more](#)

Got it!

maine antique digest